

**Remarks of
The Honorable Daniel S. Goldin
NASA Administrator**

**Daniel Webster College Commencement
May 15, 1999**

Thank you for your kind introduction. It's a privilege to join you on your graduation day.

President McCarthy, I want to salute you for your strong leadership of this great institution and for helping today's graduates reach their goal.

I also want to thank you for honoring me with a Daniel Webster College degree. I am proud to be an Eagle. It's much better being an eagle than the other bird many of us who work in Washington are compared to — the turkey.

As I receive this degree, it makes me recall that I am joining the likes of Senator Dole — a past honoree of Daniel Webster College. He and many others have a thing for New Hampshire, don't they?

I know you've all been waiting for me to declare my intentions for the year 2000. Today, I am proud to announce I am forming an exploratory committee — for more missions to Mars. What can I say, I am a rocket scientist, not a politician.

The cool thing about running NASA is that I have access to all the top secret information about the aliens. I can't mention any names, but you may want to pay closer attention to some of the candidates on the campaign trail.

I may not run for President, but I am honored to be back in New Hampshire for Daniel Webster College's 33rd commencement. This college produces many of America's best and brightest graduates in aviation, technological and business fields. As you know, each of these areas is close to my heart.

When I thought about the message I wanted to share with you today, I went back through some messages that had worked well for me in the past:

- Always wear sunscreen — already on CD . . .

- Ask not what your country can do for you . . .
- Fourscore and seven years ago . . .
- World domination through coffee and conversation . . .
- Live free or die
 - all too familiar.

What a dilemma. Where could I possibly turn for inspiring examples that would launch you toward the brave new future each of you faces?

And then it hit me. Star Wars.

No, I won't bore you by reciting dialogue — my R2D2 impression stinks. However, some people at NASA do think I'm Anakin Skywalker. Besides, you probably saw all three movies at the Common Thread last month.

And I can't give you any sneak peeks at "The Phantom Menace," because I haven't seen it either. But I will make my remarks brief enough that you can hurry over to the Nashua Mall Cinema to get in line for tickets.

So how does "Star Wars" relate to you and your future? Simple. Remember the scene in "The Empire Strikes Back" where Luke Skywalker struggles over giving in to the Dark Side or maintaining the integrity of the Force?

No, light sabre battles with heavy-breathing men in black are not in your future. However, like Luke, the choices you make will decide your destiny. And you are the only one who controls the direction you take.

Though Luke faces one defining moment, it is not just one decision that makes his destiny. Instead, it is the choices he makes along the way that prepares him for his ultimate decision. Choosing to follow the advice of Obi-Wan Kenobi, deciding to stick with Yoda's Jedi training, even though it is difficult — these decisions send Luke down the path of his destiny. And notice that he could easily have chosen other options than the ones he did, but the ultimate choice and the ultimate responsibility are his.

When I think about graduation and your journey into the future, I am reminded of the story of Oliver Wendell Holmes.

Holmes was on a train, and when the conductor came to collect his ticket, Holmes couldn't find it. The conductor recognized the great man and reassured him, "Don't worry about the ticket Mr. Holmes. You will find it when you get to your destination, and you can mail it to us."

"My dear man," Holmes replied, "the problem is not my ticket. The problem is where am I going?"

And that is the question you need to answer. Luke Skywalker chose to be a force for good, which mapped his destiny for him. Daniel Webster chose the good of the Union over all else, even though it cost him any chance at the Presidency. When people look back at your life, what will they say about your choices?

You can choose to drift, but I don't think you would be at Daniel Webster College if you just wanted to drift through life. You came here because this is a place that pushes you to give your very best, whether you are in the classroom, in the cockpit, or in the community.

Although you may not be trained as Jedi knights, remember that you all have the talent and energy to accomplish great things, and you have the robes and funny hats to prove it.

And now that you are leaving Daniel Webster behind, you can choose your destiny. When you take your diploma in a little while vow to take risks. Believe in yourself. Have confidence to pursue your dream. And when others say that it cannot be done, trust your instincts and follow them.

Don't be lured solely by goals of money, power and influence. I'm not saying any of these is bad, but if you follow your passion and pursue your dream, these will follow.

By the time you make the decision that begins to map your destiny you will have done all the research and talked it through with your family and friends. The path you choose rests with you, because only you know which is the right path to take.

Even as you try to do the right thing, you may have failures. Look on failures as a blessing. If you don't have failures, you won't learn.

The question is will you follow the path of least resistance or will you follow your passion? That is the difference between achieving mediocrity or success.

Make no mistake, your choices will make all the difference in your life.

Let me give you an example. Just a couple of weekends ago, I attended the national championships of a robotics engineering competition known as FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) in Orlando, Florida. This program pairs professional engineers, scientists and technologists together with high school students to transform kits of raw materials and basic components into complete robotic systems.

I met a young man there named Steven Lugo, from San Jose, California. A year ago, Steven was a leader of the Norteños Gang and was well on his way to becoming a homicide statistic. As a gang leader he had been stabbed four times, carried a gun, and held a grade point average of only 0.7.

Steven was in the hospital recovering from stab wounds he received in a fight when he realized he needed to make a change. This 16-year-old needed something to turn to, and that was when he searched out and discovered NASA's Mark Leon and the newly formed NASA Ames Research Center/Broadway High School robotics team. Mark Leon volunteers his time as the coach for this team of "at-risk" youth – comprised of former gang members, teenage mothers, and kids on the verge of dropping out of school. Steven made a choice and became the team's leader.

What did this choice to turn his life around do for Steven? His rookie team built two robots and captured first and second place at the West Coast Regional Competition. Both robots then made it to the finals of the FIRST National Competition. They were in the top 16 of over 300 teams.

Steven exercised his natural gift for leadership and used his intelligence without fear of being labeled. A whole world of options is now open to him. Steven is still in high school, works a part-time job and even goes to prisons to help other young men and women realize that they too have choices. Today, his grade point average is 4.0, and he has recently declared his goal to go to college and become an engineer.

But perhaps most telling, he arrived at the West Coast Regional Competition with bandages on his arms, where he just had his gang tattoos removed by laser. He wanted to tell the world that he made a choice . . . and he was not turning back.

A choice changed the entire direction of Steven Lugo's life, and the choices he continues to make along the way will reveal his destiny. Here's a kid who had everything going against him. And at 16 years old, he chose to make the most of his talents rather than drift along and follow the path of least resistance -- a path of mediocrity. By following his instincts and doing what he knew was the right thing for him to do, Steven stepped onto the path to excellence. And there's no stopping him.

Today, you have the same opportunity Luke Skywalker and Steven Lugo did. It is the power of each individual to carve out his or her own destiny, to "do or do not," in the immortal words of Yoda.

So today I challenge you to choose wisely. In the spirit of Daniel Webster, Luke Skywalker and Steven Lugo, remember that you have the power to choose your destiny. Don't waste that incredible opportunity.

Thank you.